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ABSTRACT

Service Delivery Assessment (SDA) is a qualitative evaluation strategy focused on the "delivering" of social services, rather than on monitoring the implementation of programs or assessing program outcomes. Both data collection and analysis methods are qualitative in nature. Data are gathered by intensive interviewing of providers and recipients, on-site observation, and document analysis. The first task is to develop a written protocol or conceptual framework that articulates the main focus of the SDA and maps out the specific kinds of information sought, and the information sources and data collection strategies to be used. Site selection is the second task in designing the SDA. Sites selected should reflect the range of perspectives and diversity of operating practices in the delivery of the service under study. The three levels of analysis sought by the SDA evaluator are descriptive, comparative and interpretative. When viewed from the perspective of an approach to information gathering for policy and management, SDA offers a viable alternative to the quantitative and full blown qualitative approaches currently in use. (PN)

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THE APPLICATION OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH STRATEGIES TO SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAM EVALUATIONS[1]

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Introduction

The quantitative research methodologies traditionally applied to school-based educational program evaluations have proven over the years to be limited in their ability to provide useful information to administrators and policy makers in the school setting (Cronbach, 1980). Experimental studies, survey research, and inferential techniques, characteristically the methods of choice, frequently are unable to generate the kind of policy-relevant information needed to make decisions about how and why educational programs work. For the most part, their focus is on the advanced specification of variables, the internal and external validity of the designs, and the development of robust and generalizable statistical inferences. While appropriate for research and, to some extent, large-scale program evaluations, quantitative methods are limited in the extent to which they can provide the kind of contextual, in-depth, and explanatory information needed for educational decision-making.

The past decade has witnessed an increasing use of qualitative research strategies in the conduct of program evaluations, particularly those methods associated with anthropology and sociology. A substantial set of literature is available describing both the theoretical underpinnings of qualitative research (Guba, 1978; House, 1980; Patton, 1980; Rist, 1975; and Stake, 1978) as well as the practical applications of these methods to educational evaluations (Eisner, 1972; Green and David, 1981; Herriot, 1979; Kennedy, 1979; Light and Pillemer, 1982; Scriven, 1972; Yin, Gwaltney, and Heinsohn, 1981).

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The basic elements of qualitative research include: (a) an open-ended, exploratory approach to the research/evaluative questions under study; (b) intensive fieldwork involvement of the researcher in the social setting being studied; (c) the use of participant observation, informant interviewing, and document analysis as the primary research tools; (d) an attempt to explicate and understand the meaning of events in terms of the beliefs held by those in the social setting being studied; (e) analysis which seeks to capture a holistic picture of the events and behavior under study; and (f) written documentation which analyzes and interprets events and processes in much the same way as the cultural anthropologist would document field studies.

There are several advantages to using qualitative methods in educational program evaluations. Chief among these advantages is that qualitative approaches allow for the study of open, adapting systems such as schools. Qualitative methods are sensitive to local conditions and idiosyncratic effects of programs implemented in a variety of settings. These methods provide a means for studying the spontaneous events and situations which influence the operation of programs in schools. There is no attempt to control the role of context and setting, but rather a deliberate attempt is made to understand their influences on the processes and outcomes associated with a program.

The disadvantages of employing qualitative methods to study educational phenomena have mainly to do with the sheer volume of work associated with designing, carrying out and analyzing a study. Miles (1979) has termed this approach "an attractive nuisance", suggesting that the entire process is frequently overwhelming for the researcher. One obvious disadvantage is that solid qualitative studies in the school setting require a team of trained personnel with extensive backgrounds in fieldwork methodology. In addition to the training, the team must possess the perseverance and time commitment necessary to carry out the often lengthy process. A second disadvantage has to do with the resources, both dollars and time, needed to support the data collection and analysis efforts. A third disadvantage is that qualitative

evaluations generate massive amounts of data that are difficult to synthesize into manageable reports. The users of the studies are frequently faced with long, rambling reports that put off even the more diligent readers. A fourth and perhaps more critical disadvantage is that decision-makers in the school districts, the evaluation audiences, view the approach as "subjective", susceptible to bias, and somehow not as valid as the quantitative studies with which they are familiar. Unfortunately, for the large majority of school districts in this country, the disadvantages of qualitative methods outweigh the advantages.

This paper will describe an evaluation strategy, Service Delivery Assessment, which is qualitative in nature and yet is within the reach of school district evaluation professionals, given the constraints of their limited training, tight resources, and the need for quick turn-around in the delivery of evaluation results.

Background

Service Delivery Assessments (SDA) are short-term studies specifically focused on the "delivering" of social services, rather than on monitoring the implementation of programs or assessing program outcomes. Data collection and analysis methods are primarily qualitative in nature: intensive interviewing of providers and recipients, site observation, and document analysis serving as the primary data gathering techniques (Hendricks, 1981).

SDA methods, at least as practiced at the federal level, employ few of the classical design procedures traditionally used to insure internal validity and the generalizability of findings. There are no attempts to establish experimental and control conditions or influence the assignments of recipients, nor are there any attempts made to specify and manipulate variables. Instead the delivery of services is studied in its natural context in much the same way as the criminologist or investigative reporter studies social phenomena. The most important tool of the SDA evaluator is

the personal, on-site interview with a wide variety of respondents, all of whom bring with them their perspectives of the services being delivered.

While SDA has its methodological roots in the qualitative research paradigm, particularly in the notions advanced by Guba (1978), Scriven (1972), and Stake (1975), this is not to suggest that SDA methods reflect the rigor of ethnography or the multiple case study approaches. There are, without a doubt, questions concerning the reliability and validity of SDA, particularly if the approach is equated with a research paradigm. When viewed from the perspective of an approach to information gathering for policy and management, SDA offers a viable alternative to the quantitative and full blown qualitative approaches currently in use.

SDA, as an evaluation strategy, has existed almost exclusively at the federal level, specifically in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and to some extent in the Agency for International Development. The success of the SDA approach in HHS has generated considerable interest among other federal agencies, not from the point of view of replacing program evaluations with SDA, but as a supplementary evaluative activity to be used in monitoring programs at the recipient level and as a management tool. The Departments of Education and Defense (Office of Dependents Schools) have recently initiated plans to establish SDA units within their organizational structures. State agencies have also shown interest in the SDA approach, as evidenced by their attendance at a recent symposium on the topic at the Annual Meeting of the Evaluation Research Society.

The SDA approach holds promise as an evaluation strategy for middle-sized, and particularly, large school districts. It is an appropriate strategy to evaluate the delivery of services or practices, many of which will be ancillary to or supportive of the instructional program. Examples of the types of evaluation issues for which SDA might be appropriate include the following:

Programmatic Issues

- the efficiency and effectiveness of school counseling and guidance programs;
- the consultant services provided teachers by school-based special educators, reading improvement specialists, or school guidance personnel;
- the services delivered by the school health clinics;
- the linkages and collaboration between the schools and other agencies, i.e., Teacher Corps, CETA, juvenile justice systems;
- the access, utilization, and impact of school libraries, media centers, and learning resource centers;
- the utilization and impact of teacher centers;
- the effectiveness of procedures for parental involvement in implementing provisions of PL 94-142, i.e., placement decisions and the hearing processes;

Management and Operations Issues

- the organization and delivery of school lunch and nutrition programs;
- the management of district inservice and staff development programs;
- the organization and management of reductions-in-force;
- the dissemination of information concerning district curriculum development and review activities;
- the organization and management of logistical support services, i.e., textbook acquisition, facilities and maintenance, pupil transportation services;
- the linkages and collaboration between the district and social service agencies, i.e., courts, recreation services, employment agencies.

The types of problems/issues outlined above are examples of what frequently confront school district administrators and school boards as they go about the business of managing school systems. They are not elegant problems, the kind

that make evaluation researchers quiver and tingle in anticipation. They are management problems focused on the delivery of ancillary services for which information is sought concerning:

1) what services or practices exist and how do they compare with district policy;

2) who is being served;

3) how well do the services provided match up with the needs of the recipients;

4) to what extent do the services and delivery methods vary from school to school; and

5) what are the attitudes and opinions of both the recipients and the service providers toward the service.

SDA Methodology

The remainder of this paper outlines the suggested methodology for conducting a Service Delivery Assessment in the context of a school district, although the suggested methods could be applied to a variety of social agency settings. There are four successive stages of a SDA, each with its own set of principal outcomes.

Preassessment Stage

Preassessment is a critical preparatory activity to designing and conducting SDA's. In effect, the preassessment is a mini-study conducted by the SDA evaluator(s) to scope out and focus the study. On-site interviews, observations, and review of appropriate documents would be conducted at two or three school sites, preferably selected because they represent the diversity of delivery present in the district. Preassessment also includes discussions with administrators on how the services should be delivered and where they believe problems exist. At this point, it is critical that the discussions with the administrators yield a clear description of the kinds of information sought and an agreement on the objectives (or standards) for the services delivered and the types of

evidence they are willing to accept. Where appropriate, preassessment may also include a review of the pertinent literature and policy history. Such a review might yield information concerning the extent of the problem, both within the district and in other school systems, as well as information concerning how and for whom the services were intended to be delivered. The review activities would also focus on district regulations, and perhaps state and federal legislation, as these apply to the delivery of the service.

The following represent the important outcomes of the preassessment:

- a set of "focusing questions" designed to limit the nature and scope of the study and that will guide the design, analysis and reporting of the SDA;
- identification of the principal actors associated with the delivery of the service, including the service providers, support personnel, direct recipients, and indirect recipients;
- identification of other studies, surveys, reports which may be integrated into the findings of the SDA, particularly survey data and statistical profiles;
- identification of the potential informants and any other sources of data, including activities to be observed or documents to be reviewed, which might have explanatory value;
- a plan for securing or negotiating entry into the schools or sites and access to the people who deliver and receive the services;
- identification of the principal components of the service and the contexts in which the service is delivered, including the natural events, the structures, and the "rules" that influence the delivery; and
- explication of the plausible objectives or standards against which the delivery of services is to be compared.

Service Delivery Assessment

The information and perspectives gained from the preassessment feed into the design of the SDA. The first task is to develop a written protocol on conceptual framework that articulates the main focus of the SDA and maps

out the specific kinds of information sought, the sources to be used to obtain the information, and the data collection strategies to be used (interviews, site observations, and document reviews).[2] The conceptual framework delimits the SDA, specifying in operational terms:

- the types and numbers of informants to be interviewed at each site;
- the topics to be covered in the interviews and the procedures for recording responses;
- the practices and activities to be observed;
- the specific records, memoranda, and documents to be reviewed and the data to be extracted from the review; and
- the kinds of events, processes, and activities to be observed which occur outside the provision of the service, but which may interact with or influence delivery.

Assumptions about how the services are being delivered are developed during the preassessment. The conceptual framework seeks to focus the SDA on collecting evidence which both confirms (or disconfirms) and explains those assumptions. This foreshadowing of the analysis is a critical aspect of the framework.

Without a framework to delimit the study and guide the data collection efforts across sites, the SDA may end up as a series of separate case studies that defy cross-site analysis. This is not to suggest that SDA's do not seek to describe the diversity of practices and delivery present in the system, nor does the use of a conceptual framework prevent the SDA evaluator(s) from remaining alert to the unanticipated, serendipitous events and observations that frequently occur during site visits.

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[2]It is not the purpose of this paper to outline in detail the methodologies for data collection. The reader is referred to a recent paper by Rist (1982) which outlines the procedures and possibilities for using qualitative methods in educational settings.

Site selection is the second task in designing the SDA. The critical variable is always the question of "how many". The answer to that question will depend upon two considerations: how many sites will be needed to capture the diversity of practices and delivery evident in the system and how many sites will be needed to establish the credibility of the SDA with the users of the study- the administration and perhaps the school board. The Preassessment activities, particularly the literature review and the discussions with the program managers should help make the decision about how many. The preassessment should also help the SDA evaluator(s) to cluster sites into categories representing the diversity of delivery. The variables one might consider in constructing a sampling framework include:

- the demographics of the school system, i.e., large versus small schools, the SES patterns of neighborhoods in the district, populations served;
- resources and ancillary support services available at the site which may influence the quality of delivery;
- evidence of exemplary practice or operation of the service versus evidence of dysfunction.

However the sample is selected, the goal is make certain that the sites selected reflect the range of perspectives evident in the schools and the diversity of operating practices in the delivery of the service under study.

Analysis

The analysis of data obtained in SDA's is complicated by the same issues that complicate analysis of qualitative research; the massive amounts of data obtained from on-site observations and interviews with multiple respondents, the potential for subjectivity and researcher bias, and the absence of conventions which would lead to a step-wise analytic process. Miles (1979) has described the analysis process as "a mysterious, half-formulated art" (p. 593).

The analysis process for SDA's is driven by the "focusing issues"

articulated in the conceptual framework. There are three levels of analysis sought by the SDA evaluator(s). One is descriptive - a kind of narrative description of how the service is delivered and received at each site, and across sites, as viewed from the multiple perspectives of the providers and the clients. The process is "one of consensus-building by iterative steps of gathering information, checking patterns and trends, and seeking new information to verify or refute preliminary hunches" (Hendricks, 1981, p. 15). Yin (1981) describes the process as analogous to the work of the detective, who surveys the site, develops a set of hunches, and returns to the site, several times, picking up bits and pieces, clues, which confirm and refine those hunches, until a clear picture is obtained.

The second level of analysis sought is comparative. The evaluator(s) draw comparisons between the services provided and those expected. The basis for these comparisons are either absolute, such as when comparisons are made of the services with the goals or standards reflecting the intentions of the district, or they are relative, when comparisons are made between the services provided at different sites. Absolute comparisons are difficult, at best, because rarely are the goals for the delivery of services explicated in clear operational terms. The more likely case is that comparative analysis will contain a healthy mix of absolute and relative comparisons.

The third, and perhaps more complex, level of analysis sought is interpretative. This analysis seeks to identify the conditions, factors and interrelationships in the local contexts which either facilitate or

inhibit the effective delivery of service. Fetterman (1979), in a study of the Career Intern Program, has used a set of four categories for organizing the interpretion of how local conditions or factors interrelate to produce adaptive and maladaptive relationships which are either intrinsic or extrinsic to the program. This kind of structuring of the interpretive analysis may be useful in organizing the task.

No attempt will be made here to explicate in step-by-step fashion, the mode of analysis for SDA's.[3] Dispite the considerable attention given the topic of qualitative data analysis in the last decade, no hard and fast rules exist to guide the process. Rist (1982), for example, has identified seven modes of analysis, each appropriate to qualitative data depending on the focus of the study and the perspectives sought.

Instead what is offered are a set of guidelines for use in approaching the analysis task when conducting SDA's:

1) Use the "focusing issues" outlined in the conceptual framework as the basis for analysis, but remain flexible and alert to new or emerging issues as the site visits progress.

2) Use the SDA evaluator team as a kind of "collective thinking" mechanism in the analysis process. This approach restricts researcher bias and facilitates the development of balanced interpretations. The dynamics of group interaction may force out the subtilities picked up by individual team members, but not reported because they were thought to be idiosyncratic.

3) Develop narrative reports for each site visit. The use of a debriefing process after each site visit will facilitate the integration of the team members' notes, observations, findings into a single narrative account. The narratives should be organized around the "focusing issues".

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[3]For a thorough discussion of the analysis process in qualitative research and evaluation the reader is referred to several insightful pieces in the literature (Adams, 1981; Campbell, 1957; Daillak and Alkin, 1981; David and Sterns, 1980; Hendricks, 1981; Rist, 1982; Sieber, 1978; and Yin, 1981).

4) Begin the formal analysis process early on, after several site visits. As evidence and patterns begin to emerge, the strategy may shift to the search for confirmatory and explanatory evidence. This also allows for the testing of hunches and assumptions and prevents premature closure.

5) Try to "triangulate" findings gathered from different data sources as a means of substantiating evidence. What might be conveyed in an interview could be compared with observations and archival data. Use the team members as a second means of triangulation to check for inconsistencies or confirmatory evidence.

6) Where possible and appropriate, use a tape recorder to record interviews. This allows for "interpretation checks" among team members. It also allows for the extraction of direct quotes in reporting the findings.

7) Tabulate and categorize the number of people interviewed at each site, the documents reviewed, and the activities observed. One means of establishing credibility of the report is to account for the number and array of people interviewed and observations made.

8) Build the analysis on both a description of how the services are provided and a comparison of those with the applicable objectives or standards. Include interpretations, particularly those that explain causes and effects. Try to provide alternative interpretations when the findings do not permit single, clear-cut interpretations. Evaluation audiences are as interested in the interpretations as they are in the descriptions.

9) Build the cross site analysis on the pattern-matching process suggested for the within-site analysis (Campbell, 1975). This is perhaps the most difficult task, requiring the accumulation of evidence common to each of the sites as the basis for generalization. A common pitfall is to confuse idiosyncratic evidence unique to a particular site with "generalizable" variations. The cross-site analysis should seek both a total picture of how the services are delivered as well as an explantion of how site-specific factors and conditions produce variation.

10) Reports should be brief, built upon the "focusing questions", and contain all three levels of analysis. Use direct quotes and brief descriptions of anecdotes to recreate the "reality" observed. The methodology employed in the study should be integrated into the report, rather than as a separate methodology section. Appendix the report with the full text of the study's findings. Aim for a readable, "New Yorker" style of writing to capture and hold the interest of the reader. Wherever possible, the delivery of the report should be accompanied by an oral presentation of findings similiar to a debriefing.

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